

## Time After Time by EvieSmallwood

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**Summary:**

He needs her, he wants her, he loves her.

The story of how he realises each.

# Time After Time

## Author's Note:

Me: tHeYrE nOt GoNnA bE tHaT lOnG iN tHe FuTuRe!!!!

I guess I lied?

\*cue Murray Bauman-esque oops\*

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one

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The headlights on Billy's mustang dim drastically in a matter of seconds, leaving them all standing in the hazy, darkened gloom of the pumpkin patch.

They're panting, the five of them; hearts racing in their chests, covered head to toe in dirt and bits of whatever sick *membrane* coats the walls of the Upside Down—that's the only word Mike can think of to describe it, the only thing that comes close.

Those tunnels were like a living entity, sentient and growing and demented; the only thing that had comforted him enough as he stood with the entrance behind him was that the *thing* was on fire.

(Quietly, he'd realised a long time ago that monsters weren't nearly as mystical and majestic as they seemed in storybooks, and they weren't worth fighting if you didn't have someone to save)

Now, though, that comfort is long gone. He feels his stomach drop a good foot or so inside of him. Everything seems to still.

*She's gone. She's dead. She left me again. I lost her.*

(goodbye mike)

"What the hell...?" Max breathes.

Mike wants to scream at her, because doesn't she get it? El is gone again, it's over, they *lost*. There's no god damned point to any of it anymore—

*Mike.*

Oh.

He drops the flashlight he's holding, feels the universe righten, and breathes.

Mike doesn't understand it. A small part of him, the rational part, screams that it's all in his head; he's in denial, trying to delude himself into believing that everything is fine—but his heart, and something deeper... they say: *she's okay*.

That's all he needs.

And so he doesn't question the fact that he's just heard her *voice* in his *head* (*holy shit*), because it makes sense. It just does, somehow. Just like everything else does. He can accept it because he can see it, feel it, hear it.

"Okay," Mike drops down, scoops up his flashlight, and grabs the can of gasoline. "Let's go."

"Excuse me," Steve scoffs, "I believe I'm the adult here."

Mike rolls his eyes. "You're seventeen!" he reminds him.

"It doesn't make any difference," he protests, hurrying over. "The point is, I'm in charge, okay? I make the calls." He hesitates. "Now just what is your plan, exactly?"

"We should go to the lab," Mike says. "I think something's wrong, and—"

"Yeah," Steve interjects. "No way. Listen up, twerps! We're going back to Mrs. Byers' house and we are *waiting* for everyone else—"

"Steve," Mike interrupts; everyone halts for a good second because the name comes out as some angry foreign growl. It shuts Steve up,

but Mike swallows before continuing. "Please. I'm... I'm worried. About El."

Something like understanding flashes against Steve's features, and it occurs to Mike that he might be feeling the same way about Nancy (which is so lame, because it's *Nancy*).

"Listen, Wheeler, I get it, but we can't just risk our lives on some rescue mission when you don't even know something is wrong! I've already gotten my ass kicked once tonight."

"But you *saw* the lights!"

Steve puts a hand on his shoulder. "Let's just wait," he says. "If we don't hear from them after an hour, we'll go, okay?"

Mike doesn't like it, and he especially doesn't like the feeling of losing this fight in front of everyone else.

Still, he kind of has a point.

*Kind of.*

"God, *fine*."

Steve takes it. "Keys, Red?"

Max gapes. "Don't *even*."

"What? You don't expect me to let you drive us, right?"

"Hey!" Lucas steps forward. "She's a good driver!"

"She'd kill us all," Steve says. "It's a miracle she didn't on the way here. Now hand 'em over."

"That's not my beef," Max growls, fishing the keys from her back pocket. "Don't ever call me 'Red'."

They keys are tossed over. Steve catches them. He starts rounding the car but stops halfway over, leaning against the hood with his eyes closed tightly.

“Steve?” Dustin puts a hand on his shoulder. “You okay, man?”

“Yeah,” Steve waves him off. “I’m fine—”

“Nah, I don’t think so,” says Lucas. “He looks pretty messed up.”

“I’m fine,” Steve rounds on them all, so quickly that he stumbles a bit, and slams his fist down on the hood hard enough to leave a small dent. Max winces.

“Everything is fine,” he insists. “How far is the drive?”

“Like five minutes,” Max replies, warily. Her eyes are locked into the indentation in her brother’s car.

“Okay,” Steve pinches the bridge of his nose and then hisses. “Okay! Everyone in the damn car.”

They don’t move.

“Now!”

With some swearing and shoving, they get all their supplies back in the trunk and then pile into the vehicle.

The drive back is longer than five minutes. Mike knows that because he spends all nine in unbridled, internal agony. He pictures all the ways everything could have gone wrong, worries that something might have happened to Will, to Nancy, to Mrs. Byers—

(to el)

—but those thoughts are cut off abruptly as Lucas’s hand comes down on his shaking knee.

“Mike,” he broaches, gentler than expected, “it’s okay.”

“How do you know?”

He doesn’t expect his voice to sound so broken, but the only other person who can hear is Max, and Mike is pretty damn sure he misjudged her.

Lucas shrugs. "I just do," he says.

It sounds almost like a fallacy to Mike, but he keeps his mouth closed.

He keeps it closed because he understands what Lucas feels, maybe even more than *Lucas*. It's like a dull, pulsating hum in the back of his mind. A tether to someone else. It says very softly and assuringly, without having to say anything at all: *hi. i'm right here.*

(you won't lose me)

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They skid to a stop in front of the Byers house. Mike is out of the car faster than any of the others, even though the Blazer isn't here and neither is Jonathan's LTD. He needs *air*.

The others—mostly Steve—are slower about getting up to the house. Dustin has one hand on Steve's back, gently guiding him up the stairs.

They open the door. Billy is still there.

"Shit," Steve gripes. "You left him here?!"

"He weighs two-hundred pounds!" Lucas protests. "Besides, he's a psychopath. No one wanted to touch him."

"Right," he nods to himself, hands falling to his hips. "Okay, so... So we're gonna take him outside. Leave him on the porch, keep the door locked."

"And what if he breaks down the door?" Max inquires, eyebrows raised.

"Then I guess we'll have to kick *his* ass this time," Steve replies. "But that won't happen, because you drugged him, right? And that shit should last a while. Hopper'll be back soon, anyway."

"So you admit you totally got your ass kicked?"

Lucas frowns. "Weren't you just defending him earlier?"

“Yeah, I was,” Dustin agrees, “and only *I* get to make fun of him.”

Steve waves them all off and stumbles over to Billy, grabbing him by the ankles. He lifts, then waits cautiously with his eyes on Billy’s face before dragging him one-eighty. “Move outta the way.”

They scatter. Mike sidesteps away from all of them and heads down the hallway, to the bathroom.

Once he’s alone, with the door locked, Mike lets himself fall apart.

It feels a little like taking off a wet raincoat; peeling back a layer. He sinks down and curls into himself, biting his lip to silence the noise that’s building up in his throat.

He doesn’t know why, but the first thought that occurs to him, sitting there on the cold bathroom tile, is that he wants to go home.

He really, *really* does. He wants to be able to curl up between his parents on the couch and watch some stupid TV show and fall asleep. He wants to be ten again, back when Holly was still really just a baby, and his parents were actually trying with each other.

He’s not ten, though. And his parents don’t try. There are no more nights like that.

There’s just monsters. And death (bob; bloody, torn apart and gaping and *eaten*), and loss (goodbye mike; I can’t lose you), and betrayal (don’t blame *her*).

Reality is full of some destructive darkness that eats away everything good. Mike is pretty sure of that. He’s sure because this whole last year, anything that hasn’t been reality; dreams from day or night... they’re the only good things. She’s always there, next to him, holding his hand and smiling and breathing.

She’s the good, he’d realised. She’s what makes life less real and more *unbelievable*.

He needs her. He doesn’t know when that started, maybe the moment she stumbled into his life, so bright she’d blinded him.

Or maybe the moment she left, in a flurry of dust, screaming and tearing the world apart.

(she's back)

Mike sucks in a sharp breath, halting his own broken, silent sobs. He leans his head back against the door, closes his eyes, and slips.

Into what, he doesn't know. It feels a little like another dream, and he can sense that she's here. It must be one.

*Are you okay?*

His voice sounds shaky and croaky, exactly like how it should given he's been crying. But his mouth doesn't open.

El's response is clear and sharp and wonderful.

Yes.

He smiles. *Thank god.*

"Mike?!"

Someone raps on the door. Mike jolts, eyes flying open. He takes in his surroundings—no longer the impenetrable darkness and the listless of... whatever that had been.

Will's bathroom. Right. Obviously.

"Yeah," he stands shakily. "Just give me a sec."

"If you're taking a shit and stinking it up," warns Dustin, "I swear to god—"

"Shut up," Mike snaps.

But he's grinning.

It feels weird. He's smiled, sure, but he hasn't grinned in so long—cheek to cheek, so hard it hurts.

It feels like someone took ten pounds of concrete off his back and he's

finally able to think clearly again.

“Alright, God,” comes Dustin’s muffled voice.

Mike looms over the sink. He turns on the faucet and leans down, splashing his face with water. It feels fucking awesome. He hadn’t realised how much grime he’d accumulated until he sees the water run brown as it circles the drain.

He gets a little in his hair, as well, running his hands through it. His neck, his collarbone.

When he’s done, he stares at himself in the mirror.

Mike Wheeler stares back. Thirteen, exhausted, and a complete and total mess.

*Pretty*, hums a voice in the back of his mind.

Mike shivers. *This is so weird.*

Something like regret shoots through him, but it’s not his own. *Sorry.*

*No*, Mike shakes his head. *It’s okay. Can you see me?*

*No*, she replies. *Just... for a second. Now it’s me and Hop again.*

*Okay.* Mike breathes. *Are you close?*

*Close*, she agrees. *Tired.*

*I miss you.*

It’s uncontrollable. Whatever’s flowing between them is so easy and natural, there’s no filter for any second thought, or consideration.

*I miss you, too.*

Then the connection lessens. Mike is still standing in front of the sink. Alone.

Dustin hammers on the door again. “Mike!”

Mike jerks it open, “I know, I know—”

“No, it’s not that,” Dustin places his hands on Mike’s shoulders, “Nancy’s here.”

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She’s covered in a sweat that still glistens, hair pulled back out of her face. He’s still getting used to the shorter cut; he remembers the day she’d come out of the bathroom with scissors in hand, looking both terrified and pleased.

They’d stood in the hallway staring at one another, and then gone their separate ways.

Now, she stops short once she catches sight of him, just like then.

The next thing he knows, she’s pulling him into her arms. It’s not like the hastened squeeze she’d given his hand in the car after (bob) the lab.

It’s like last year. She’s desperate, worried and upset and this time, instead of standing stock still in shock, he hugs her back.

They’re almost the same height, now.

“Are you okay?”

It’s him that asks, even if they’re both wondering.

Nancy grips his sweatshirt tighter. “No,” she breathes, voice cracking just a little. He doesn’t know if anyone else is listening or even cares but he does, and he knows that now. “You?”

Mike bites his lip. “I don’t know. I guess.”

Nance pulls away and studies him, in that way only a sister really can, like she’s taking in all the changes she missed while she was moping in her own shit.

He does the same to her.

They’re both so messed up.

"Why are you dirty?" Nancy frowns down at his cords. "What happened?"

"Um."

"Steve?! What did you do?"

Steve hesitates. "Can we talk? For a second? Outside?"

It might only be because she so obviously broke his heart that his sister agrees, but she does. Steve leads her, and the last thing Mike hears before he goes into the back to check on Will is *'oh my god!'* and *'he's just unconscious!'*

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"How is he?"

Mrs. Byers is too busy getting Will into his bed to really hear Mike. It's Jonathan who answers.

"He's okay. Just... tired."

"Mike?"

Will's voice, startling and a lot hoarse (he's been screaming, the logical part of Mike's brain supplies), makes them all jump.

Mrs. Byers feels Will's forehead with a frown. "Just rest, okay, sweetie?"

Will shakes his head. He rolls over, eyes meeting Mike's. "I'm sorry," he sobs. "I'm so, so sorry."

"Will, baby, no," Mrs. Byers wipes his tears away swiftly. She looks worn and on the verge of breaking down.

Jonathan comes over quickly, pushing Will's hair out of his eyes. "You did so good," he says. "You don't have anything to be sorry for."

Will jerks away from his touch. "I'm sorry," he says again.

Mike doesn't know what to do but come closer. He's vaguely aware of the others behind him, standing in the hall, too afraid to crowd Will or overload him but just as concerned.

Mike hovers by Will's bed. He takes the hand Will uses to clutch at his shirt, red-rimmed eyes earnest and so full of guilt. "I didn't wanna," he cries. "I couldn't stop it. I killed people. I'm so *sorry*."

"That wasn't you," Mike says. It seems like the right thing, but it doesn't do much.

Will shakes his head, anguished. "I killed *Bob*."

Everyone in the room winces. There's a stillness, only interrupted by Will's sobs—so heavy he curls into himself a little more with each one.

And Mike understands, then, that Will doesn't think they love him anymore. He won't let them comfort him, doesn't think he can rely on anyone but himself.

"It's okay, Will," he says. And it is; even if all he can see is (blood, red blood, smeared on tile, everywhere so much of it) Bob. "No one is mad at you, we promise."

Mrs. Byers looks at him with so much gratitude it's like he handed her the moon.

"That's right, baby," she says to Will, running her hand up and down his back. "We're just so glad you're okay."

Will unfurls a little, and Mike knows there's hope.

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"You think he'll be okay?"

It's Dustin who asks. They're sitting around the kitchen, perched on the counters—or, in Lucas and Max's case, at the table. Dustin had salvaged a box of ice cream sandwiches from the freezer.

Mike swallows. "I don't know," he says. It's the most honest answer he can give.

Lucas shifts. “He’s gotten through this stuff before, though, right? I mean, he’s strong, y’know?”

“This is different,” Mike replies, sharply. It silences them all. There’s something familiar and right about that; something Mike’s been sort of missing.

Control. Steadiness. Reliance. His friends, looking to him for answers and listening (actually *listening*) when he speaks.

Mike goes on. “It was in his head, and it... it made him do things. Things Will would never do—and it showed him things he wouldn’t ever want to see. It made him kill people. That’s not the same as hiding in the Upside Down for a week.”

“I hate this,” Dustin says morosely. “Why does everything have to be so messed up?”

“Hey, at least you have good grades this semester.”

Mike doesn’t know where it comes from, or why it makes Dustin snort with laughter—but that gets them all going. Mike finds himself doubled over, choking for air.

Then he’s not laughing, just choking, because he feels like he just got punched in the stomach.

His heart skips a beat.

“El,” he breathes. Mike jumps down from the counter and races to the door.

He knows, he *knows*, he can feel her—

The Blazer pulls up to the porch. The car jostles slightly as Hopper gets out. By then, the others have come up behind Mike.

“How the hell did you know...?”

“Not important,” Mike replies, even though it so is, and they’re totally gonna ask again later.

Hopper opens the door. Mike steps off the porch onto the steps, air caught in his throat—

Her legs come into view; beat up Chucks (his old ones) and pegged jeans. Hopper helps her slip out of the car.

El.

She looks like hell; blood dried and seeping from both nostrils, dark rings around her eyes coupled with smudged eye makeup. She's shadowed and veined and looks dead on her feet, but it's kind of badass.

He's never been more amazed in his whole life.

Mike's knees are definitely a little weak as she approaches, helped by Hopper, and he can't help but feel like a total dweeb just standing here while *Hopper* of all people keeps her on her feet.

He swallows the anger that rises in his throat, because that should be him, but it's gone in seconds.

Only because she's standing right in front of him, swaying just a little, eyes tearful but gleaming in the dim light.

Mike takes one step down. His shoes make contact with the gravel. She takes one step forward at the same time, and then she's in his arms.

The first time, it had been a little like coming home. A little like holding something he'd been missing for a long time—like when he was ten and he'd lost his favorite Star Wars action figure, only to tear apart his room and find it shoved under his bed. He'd held it to his chest like a total dweeb, panting and relieved.

Now it's that, but amplified by like ten million.

El's hands are present and solid against him, nails digging into his back through his sweatshirt. Her heart pounds against her chest, against his. Mike holds her close (as close as possible) and finds some sort of solace.

*Hi.*

He has to hide his grin against her neck (her warm neck, which he can feel her pulse through, which his lips are brushing against). *Hi. You did awesome.*

Warmth; in his stomach, flowing through his veins, going straight to his head. He doesn't know if she's feeling it or he is or they both are.

"Okay," Hopper's voice draws him out of their embrace, "I don't mean to interrupt, but it's cold out here and she needs rest."

On that, Mike can agree. He turns to El. "How do you feel?"

She shrugs. "Bad," she says. Then, "gross."

He doesn't know why he grins; he just missed her. He missed her voice (he'd forgotten, about six months ago, how it sounded. that had been one of the worst days ever, coming up blank when he tried to remember), he'd missed her warmth, he'd missed the way she spoke—softly and succinct.

And she knows more, now. It totally blows his mind. She's like... the world's coolest person. Cooler than Han Solo or Luke Skywalker or Indiana Jones.

"C'mon," Hopper puts a hand between El's shoulder blades and guides her, with surprising gentleness, up the porch steps. El doesn't let go of Mike, though; she keeps the hem of his jacket clasped in her grip.

The others have already retreated inside. Mike takes in the smell of microwaved popcorn, sees Dustin, Lucas, and Max at the counter beginning to assemble peanut butter sandwiches, and feels suddenly so relieved and so tired he almost falls over.

El tugs on his jacket. "Okay?"

"Yeah?" Mike rights himself. "I'm fine."

He lets go of the chair he'd grabbed onto.

Hopper gives him a once over. Then he turns to El. “What first?”

“Shower,” is El’s immediate reply.

Hopper nods. “Where’s Joyce?”

He directs the question to all of them. Max answers, because she’s the only one who isn’t at least a little phased by the urgency, the *desperation*, in his tone. “Will’s room.”

Hopper grunts. “I’m gonna go get you some clothes, okay? Just sit down.”

El jerks her chin up in some semblance of a nod. Hopper stalks down the hall, tall and imposing but somehow natural in the setting.

“Couch,” El tugs on Mike’s sleeve, now. He follows, just a tiny bit sluggish.

El plops down. When he doesn’t, she frowns up at him. “Mike?”

“Hold on,” Mike finds her hand, squeezes it, and then hurries into the kitchen. His energy is restored with a ridiculous quickness, but the how is beyond him.

(purpose)

Mike wets a washcloth, rings it out, and walks back to her.

El perks up. Mike sits across from her. “Just stay still, okay?”

She does. Mike gently dabs at the dried blood on her face, careful not to rub too hard. Enough of it comes off, and so he works at the makeup around her eyes, biting his lower lip all the while.

“Done,” he announces, after a minute.

El raises her eyebrows. “Pretty good?”

He can’t breathe. He decides right then that she’s absolutely gonna be the death of him.

“Pretty,” he says.

And then it's just her and him, no one else matters. Her finger is tracing his jawline, there's goosebumps all over his skin.

She kisses him.

Her lips are soft, chapped, and far too hot. Her whole face emanates heat, actually—enough to startle him out of ‘*wow holy crap*’ into ‘*oh no*’.

Mike pulls away as soon as he can actually convince himself to. El's face contorts into something like a pout.

He's very aware of their friends in the kitchen—of their surprised noises and hissing and the hit Lucas throws at the back of Dustin's head (followed by one to each of them from Max).

But he's also very, very aware of El's hand on his thigh. The other one is in his own, fingers intertwined.

He's most definitely on fire.

El rests her forehead against his shoulder. Mike folds into her embrace. He doesn't need bullshit right now, he just needs her.

“Are you okay?”

Who even cares when she's *burning up*. He can feel it even through her clothing. It radiates off of her.

El nods, but she only sinks deeper into him. As cool as that feels, he can't relax.

“You should take your jacket off,” he suggests.

El nods again. She doesn't move.

*Okay*, Mike thinks. Then he starts working it off of her. El moves her arms when needed, but other than that she's kind of lifeless.

“Jeez, Mike, you should probably let her rest up before you scr—”

“Shut up, you asshole!” Max growls.

Mike couldn't be more grateful, though why she's defending him, he doesn't know. He seriously needs to apologise.

He's very aware, now, that this last year has consisted of him stumbling blindly through a fog. He's taken each moment as it comes and then let it pass once it was over. He's become a shadow of a person.

Not anymore, though.

The jacket is set aside, revealing the black and torn muscle shirt she's wearing underneath.

God, she's so fucking *cool*.

Also, she definitely has a fever.

"Go get Hopper," Mike says to Lucas.

Lucas nods. It's jarring. When was the last time he didn't put up a fight to getting ordered around? Months ago?

(Why does he even care?)

Then he's gone and Mike doesn't have any time to contemplate it further. El moans in discontent, pulling him closer.

"It's okay," he presses his lips to her gelled-back hair (what am I doing?). "You're gonna be fine."

Hopper steps into the room. He looks pale and exhausted, but it doesn't stop him. He comes over to feel her forehead. "Jesus, kid," he breathes. "I don't need mercury to know you're in the triple digits, let me tell you that."

El moans again, turning her head from his hand back against Mike's neck.

Hopper sighs. "Where's your sister?"

"Out, with Steve. They went to go deal with a situation."

Raised eyebrows. "A situation?"

"Yeah," Mike locks his jaw. "A situation."

Hopper pinches the space between his brows. "Okay," he says, "she could probably use a cold shower, so—"

"I can help," Max steps forward.

It might have been the right thing to do with anyone else, but El rounds on Max. "No," she snaps. "Not you."

*What?*

"Oh, well excuse me," Max throws up her hands. "God, what did *I* ever do to *you*?!"

"It's okay," Mrs. Byers hurries into the room, out of breath. "I'm here, I can help."

El looks at Mrs. Byers like she's the sun after a week-long storm. "Yes," she says, and then slips from Mike's arms. She won't let go of his hand.

"El," Mike tries to gently pull away. "Privacy, remember?"

He gives her a small smile. It's enough. She lets go, and it's like someone chopped off one of his limbs. He feels so cold without her excessive heat.

Mrs. Byers leads El out. Hopper stands. "I need a drink."

None of them think much of it. It doesn't even occur to Mike that the Byers don't really keep beer in the house, because of Lonnie. They all sink down into welcoming cushions, letting their throbbing heads rest

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Until Dustin jerks. "Don't open that!"

Too late.

"Oh, Jesus!"

“Shit,” Dustin shoots out of the recliner and runs over. “Don’t worry about this, okay, Chief? It’s for science.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yeah,” Dustin struggles with the blanket wrapped demo-dog. “It’s my contribution, my great discovery—”

“Your great damn mistake,” Hopper says. “You’re not keeping it.”

Dustin’s face falls. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“Actually,” Dustin is only getting fired up, now, “I discovered this species, therefore it’s my decision what happens to it. And I say I’m keeping it—”

“And I say, unless you wanna get locked up or brainwashed or shot, you take the damn thing out in the backyard and burn it. Are we clear?”

Dustin falters. “I—”

“*Are we clear?*”

“Yes. Sir. Crystal clear.”

“Wheeler!” Hopper jerks his head. “Help the kid take it outside.”

Mike scowls. “A please would be nice.”

“What was that?”

“I said,” Mike rises from the couch, coming over regardless, “a *please* would be nice.”

They hold each other’s gazes for a long moment—too long, because it reminds Mike of not three hours before, when he’d been sobbing against Hopper’s chest and felt something; something like good, something like family, something like home.

It was only a ghost of a feeling. An echo of how Mike used to view

his own father. But it's still enough to shake him, still enough to make him avert his eyes and duck down to help Dustin.

They drag the rotting, slimy corpse from the kitchen to the back door. Mike props it open and they push it the rest of the way.

The demo-dog rolls down the steps and falls into the mud with a splat.

"Sick," Mike mutters.

Dustin shakes his head. "Come on," he says. "Let's hide it in the shed."

"What? No!"

"You mean you actually want to burn it?"

"Well... sort of?"

Dustin glowers. "Do you have any idea the shit I had to go through to keep this thing as long as I did? This... it's a new species, Mike! Everything about it is completely unknown! We could discover so much, about what we've been fighting and where it comes from and what the Upside Down actually is. And you know what Mr. Clarke says about curiosity voyages—"

"Dustin," Mike cuts his friend off, voice raised slightly but not as much as it might have been before (before she came back). "Listen, I know this is important to you, but... you're really smart, okay? You'll discover other things, or something."

Dustin shifts from foot to foot. "I'm immune to flattery."

"Yeah? Well how about reality?" Mike steps a little closer. "What Hopper said? He wasn't kidding. Why do you think he hid El for an entire year? These people aren't a joke. They have guns, and tanks, and they're really, really good at making bad shit seem like accidents."

*They'll probably make Bob's death seem like one, Mike thinks. Even though he died a hero. They'll say he got in a car accident or killed*

*himself.*

Dustin swallows. "You really think this won't be it for me?"

"How old was Einstein? Or Darwin or Tesla or Galileo?"

"Tesla was actually pretty young."

"Alright, well screw Tesla," Mike waves him off. "The rest were old dudes. My point is, you have years, okay? Maybe one day you'll be the guy who invents time travel."

Dustin grins. "That would be pretty sweet."

"Yeah, it would," Mike shoves his shoulder lightly.

"Would you do all the engineering if I figured out an algorithm?"

It's a serious question, and Mike is half-serious when he answers, "Yeah, totally."

Dustin shrugs with a sappy smile. "Okay," he says. "Let's burn it."

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Nancy and Steve come back not five minutes after that. Hopper manages to get the truth out of them, after which he spends at least ten minutes lecturing Steve on the meaning of "stay put".

It's funny to watch, until Hopper rounds on the rest of them.

Then, he's worn out. Hopper sinks into a chair, closing his eyes. "You just need to be more careful," he says.

It's as close as Mike and Nancy have ever gotten to a father's 'I'm only yelling because I care'.

His sister frowns. "What smells like smoke?"

"Don't ask," Mike says quickly. Then, "Did you call mom?"

Nancy nods distractedly. She glances anxiously at the darkened hallway. Her gaze shifts to Steve, and then back again.

He knows what she's gonna ask before she asks it. "Bedroom," he says. "With Will. They're sleeping."

Her shoulders sag. "Oh," she says. "Okay."

Steve drops the paper bag under his arm onto the coffee table. "We got KFC," he says, voice colder and more detached than Mike's ever heard it before. "Dig in, nimrods."

---

Mike manages to get halfway through his plate before Mrs. Byers pokes her head around the corner. "Mike, sweetie? She's asking for you."

His heart skips a beat. Suddenly the food isn't so enticing. To fix his dry mouth, he chugs from his Fanta and then follows her through the hall.

The floorboards creak. It's dark, almost eerie; but there's a light on under Mrs. Byers' door.

She holds it open for him. "I'll give you two a minute, okay?"

Mike smiles gratefully. He's overcome, suddenly, with sorrow for her. Sorrow and admiration and some weird sort of kinship; *we both saw that, and it sucked*.

Mrs. Byers—Joyce—seems to get that. She ruffles his hair. "Just be quiet, okay?"

"Yeah," Mike nods. "Thank you."

"No problem."

Mike ducks past her. He's vaguely aware of the door closing behind him, and of all the air leaving his lungs.

The world could explode right now and he wouldn't even notice.

Curly.

Her hair is curly.

*Holy shit.*

Brown, wild ringlets that form a halo around her head—glowing in the yellow light of the lamp, slightly frizzy and a little golden, *wow*.

Somehow, he never would have imagined this, but it's sort of greater than anything he could've come up with in a dream.

"Mike?"

She's standing by the vanity in some old white shirt of Joyce's. The pajama pants she's wearing are so long she's had to bunch them up around the waist like a billion times.

She's an angel.

"Um," Mike swallows. "Yeah?"

El steps closer, frowning. "Are you okay?"

"Oh," he forces himself to look away from her hair to her face—to her cheeks, still slightly flushed, and her lips, and her eyes (they look the same as they always did, which is comforting in a weird way; still full of concern and curiosity).

He's so done for.

"I'm great," Mike manages.

For now and all of history.

"Good," El steps closer, making no sound against the plush carpet, and wraps her arms around his waist. She wrinkles her nose. "You smell."

"Sorry," his face is probably so red. "I didn't have time to shower..."

"It's okay," El sinks into him anyway. "I like you anyway."

"Yeah?" Mike finds himself wrapping an arm around her waist on instinct. He lowers it on a second thought, and then takes her hand instead.

El nods, seemingly not noticing how awkward he feels. “Yes.”

He experimentally touches her cheek, and when she doesn’t flinch away (instead, she leans into the touch, eyes fluttering closed), he lightly brushes the ends of her curls before threading his fingers through her hair.

It’s so soft. Like, *so* soft. And it smells like lemons.

He might actually pass out.

El tilts her head. “Bad?”

“No,” he says. He can’t believe he’s so close to her. “Just new. It’s good.”

She smiles—really smiles; like, as wide as the first time he’d ever really seen it, when he’d showed her his dad’s stupid chair; dimples and all. It makes every thought leave his head and his heart start hammering against his ribcage.

“I like yours, too,” she says. “And your voice.”

“My voice?”

“Deeper,” El elaborates. “It’s pretty. You’re pretty.”

Mike blushes. Her finger comes up to touch his face, brushing over his cheeks and nose. “Stars.”

“My freckles?”

“Mm-hmm,” she nods. “I love them.”

He grins. Stupidly and widely. “Oh.”

El wraps her arms around his neck. “Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“Will you... Would you kiss me?”

*Oh.*

He does.

It's like melting. He can't focus on anything but the overwhelming scent of her shampoo and the taste of mint on her lips. She's everything he's ever needed or wanted and she wants him back and that's like, the greatest thing ever.

He can't believe this is happening. She's here, after so long.

Something like grief takes over him, and Mike draws away. He rests his forehead against her own, a little dazed. "I missed you."

"Mike," she breathes, placing a hand on either side of his face, "you don't have to anymore."

*I'm here.*

Mike sucks in a breath. "How do you do that, by the way?" He asks. "Not that it's not like, super cool, it's just... how long have you been able to? And how can I do it back?"

"Mike..." she smiles, takes his hand, and pulls him over to the bed. He almost wants to resist (bed, girl, closed door) but this is *El*, and they're only thirteen.

The mattress bounces beneath them. El crawls over the surface and lays down. She pats the spot next to her.

Mike swallows. "You sure?"

She rolls her eyes—rolls them, all normal teenage girl like. But she's grinning, too. "Yes."

Mike kicks off his shoes and lies down.

She throws an arm over his stomach and scoots closer. That sixth sense takes over again. Mike runs his thumb up and down her arm, feeling weirdly satisfied when goosebumps erupt where he touches her.

"So how do you do it?"

She shrugs. “Don’t know.”

“Well... how long have you been able to?”

“Today,” she says. “when I needed you, and you needed me.”

*And how can I do it back?*

“You’re special,” she says, leaning over him. “To me.”

She presses a kiss to the tip of his nose. He’s pretty sure he’s died and gone to heaven.

“Sleep,” she says.

“But-Mrs. Byers—”

“Jonathan’s bed,” El replies, head already hitting the pillow.

“And me?”

“I want you to stay.”

It’s a full, complete, utterly confident sentence; her gaze locked onto his, her hand snaking around his ribs. He feels himself warm all over, stomach fluttering.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she nods. “Stay, Mike.”

“Okay,” he relaxes against the mattress, letting his tension bleed away (there’s so much of it he actually hisses in pain).

El frowns. “Hurt?”

“I’m fine,” he assures her.

El seems satisfied. “Sleep.”

*Anything for you, El*, he thinks, and even though he isn’t sure where the hell it comes from, it feels right.

He falls asleep to that rightness, with her arms around him and her head tucked into the crook of his neck.

(hopper comes in a little while later and finds them both sprawled out on that bed. he can't be mad; he really can't. they deserve this, at least. this one night.)

---

two

---

The music is loud and overbearing as Mike pulls away from El, but he can hardly hear it anyway. All he can focus on is her.

She's here. She actually came. *Holy shit.*

"C'mon," Mike tugs on her hand lightly, still blown away by the fact that she's holding it, she's actually with him. He leads her away from the dance floor, toward the table that Will and Dustin are once again occupying.

Dustin's eyes widen. "Oh my god! You're here!"

El smiles. "Hi, Dustin."

'Hi' isn't good enough; Dustin shoots out of his chair and hugs her. El stiffens at first, but Mike squeezes her hand on a hunch and she relaxes, letting go of him and instead reciprocating with Dustin.

"This is gonna be so awesome," he proclaims. "Like, the most tubular night of our lives."

El frowns. "Tub-u-lar?"

"It means really cool," Mike supplies.

"Oh," El nods, shrugging. "Tubular."

"*Excellent*," Dustin grins. He wriggles his eyebrows. "So, you wanna dance?"

"We just did," Mike says, "and now we're gonna sit, so..."

Dustin looks between them. “You two are gonna be so gross in high school.”

Mike doesn’t know whether to roll his eyes or laugh. He ends up doing the former, before leading El over to the table.

Will gives a small wave. “Hi, El.”

She smiles in return. “Hi, Will.”

It’s a much tamer greeting than their first, which had involved some weird electric energy and a lot of crying and apologising. Mike still remembers the way they’d sort of fallen into each other’s arms, drawn together, like two pillars collapsing on one another. He doesn’t think he’ll ever forget it.

(he’ll never get over how broken Will had sounded when he thanked her, over and over, or how strong El had been when she promised that it was okay, and that he’d saved her, too)

“Do you like the music?”

“I don’t know much about it,” El replies. She wrinkles her nose. “Hop listens to... weird stuff.”

This peaks all of their interest. “Like what?”

El thinks. “Jim Croce?”

“Oh, *dude!*” Dustin laughs.

“Man, I’ve gotta make you a mixtape,” Will says. “I’ll hook you up with all the good stuff. Clash, Zeppelin, the Ramones—”

“Don’t suffocate her with your alt rock bullshit,” Mike says.

“Oh, and what do you suggest? The Star Wars soundtrack?”

“Hey! John Williams is one of the most talented composers of our time—”

He can’t speak anymore, because he’s laughing too hard; Will is

throwing bits of a crumpled up cookie at him, prompting Dustin to do the same. “Stop!”

“Alright, alright, lay off him,” Dustin spreads his arms, “you have to admit, that soundtrack is an experience.”

“Thank you, Dustin.”

“Besides, everyone knows Mike secretly loves Cyndi Lauper—”

“I do not!” Mike protests.

“Who’s Cyndi Lauper?” El inquires, lips downturned.

“A famous singer,” Mike supplies, adding to the collective of them, “who I *don’t* like!”

“Who don’t you like?”

Lucas’s voice makes them all start slightly. He’s standing hand in hand with Max and grinning like an idiot. *Oh my god*, Mike thinks. *Are El and I that obvious?*

“You, that’s who,” Mike cuts in, before anyone can say shit about *Cyndi Lauper*.

Lucas rolls his eyes. “You know you love me, Mikey.”

“Blow it out your ass, Sinclair.”

“Can I talk to you?”

It’s El who speaks, abrupt and louder than Mike could have predicted. She’s looking right at Max, whose cheeks flush. “Uh...”

Lucas nudges her shoulder with his own. “It’s cool,” he says. “Ellie’s nice.”

Max seems doubtful, which makes Mike’s blood start to boil just a bit, but then she shrugs. “Okay, I guess,” she says. “As long as you promise not to bite my head off.”

“Promise,” El smiles, rising. She glances at Mike. “Be right back.”

Mike can't help but feel... well, nervous; does she even know her way around the school? Is he *supposed* to let her go off on her own?

He doesn't exactly consider Hopper El's *dad*, but he's very aware the man owns a gun.

Still, El has super powers. And Max is... Max.

So he nods.

They walk away, together but separate, like they're both too afraid to get close.

"'Ellie'?!" Dustin inquires.

"Man, shut up," Lucas whacks his head as he sits down. "I'm trying it out."

---

Max Mayfield isn't an idiot. She knows El doesn't like her, and she knows the girl has crazy superpowers, and now the opportunity to get Max alone has finally arisen.

She's gonna die.

Well, maybe not. Maybe she could fight El, or run away fast enough. It's not like Max is powerless; she just doesn't have *telekinesis*.

"I'm sorry."

Max stops short. They're halfway to the bathroom and they haven't said a word, until El breaks the silence.

"Sorry?"

"Yeah," El faces Max. In the dim light, she looks ghostly—but not half as intimidating as she had that night, with her occultist eyeshadow and slicked back hair. She looks normal; like a regular teenage girl. Pretty and glossy and primped up, like Stacey or Jenny Hayes.

Yet she's apologising, which is something those girls probably

wouldn't ever do. It's a total aberration that Max isn't exactly prepared for.

"Yes," El says. Then frowns. "Yeah. I was rude."

"Well... yeah, you were," Max starts walking again, because it makes her feel a little more in control. El follows.

"I thought you liked Mike."

That almost makes her trip, but she doesn't. She just laughs. "Mike? Oh my god, *no way*."

"I saw you," El adds on, as if Max hadn't spoken a word, "in the gym. He was... smiling."

"That doesn't mean he likes me, or that I like him," Max says. El's face sort of falls at that, and so Max finds herself going on. "Well, I mean... smiles can be super significant, okay? Like, when Mike smiles at you, I'm sure it means a lot. With Mike and I, it's platonic—that means we're just friends, and we're not even friends."

"Platonic," El echoes.

"Yeah," Max pulls El in the direction of the bathroom. They go inside. It's thankfully empty, and dark even with the fluorescent lights overhead.

"So... you and Lucas?"

Max blushes. Is it that obvious?

But something about the way El looks at her, all hopeful and desperate and lost, it melts Max's resolve to just shut her mouth.

"Yeah," she confesses. "Me and Lucas."

It sounds good.

El smiles. "Me and Mike," she returns, cheeks pink.

Yeah, no duh. Max can't help but grin, though. God, this girl is an

enigma. "Help me get these braids out?"

El obliges. Her fingers work through Max's red locks with hesitance, but she gains surety the more she detangles.

Max wets a paper towel and wipes her lipgloss off. *Ah, sweet victory.*

When El is done, she steps back and nods. "Pretty."

That's like, the opposite of what Max was going for (so why does she feel, like, gratified?).

Max holds her hand out. "Friends?"

El shakes, this time. "Friends."

---

"Why do they call each other that?"

Mike turns to her, frowning. "What?"

"*'Stalker'*," she explains. "*'Madmax'*."

"Oh," Mike nods. "Those are nicknames."

"Like El and Mike?"

He can't help but smile—even though it's so, so stupid—when she says their names. Together. In one sentence.

"Uh, not really," Mike leans against the bleacher above him, mindless of the sharp edge digging into his back.

She's like, playing with his fingers. Her thumb runs over his knuckles sometimes and it's pretty much the most awesome thing ever.

"Why?"

"Well, Max is already short for Maxine," he explains. "Nicknames are like... special. And sometimes they're just between you and another person. Everyone calls you El, y'know?"

"Hop calls me Jane," she says. "Sometimes."

“Jane?”

El nods. She flips his palm over and starts tracing the lines (scratch that, *this* is the best thing ever). Mike leans forward a little to see what she’s doing.

Also, being closer to her is really, really nice.

She smells like vanilla, and her hair is super soft. Some of it is tickling his cheek. The backs of her eyes are shadowed in pink and there’s some sort of glitter on her face. She’s so pretty.

*Beautiful.*

“It’s my name.”

“Jane?” He asks again, stupidly.

El smirks. “Yeah,” she says. “Jane Ives.”

He can’t help the way his hair stands on end when she says it. It’s like she reveals a missing piece that he doesn’t dislike but doesn’t really *want*. He likes El. She’s *El*.

“I like El, better, though,” she says, scooting a little closer.

*Yeah, okay*, something whispers in the back of his mind. *This is it*.

“Yeah?”

“You gave it to me,” she says, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

Mike bites his lip. “Oh. Okay. Cool.”

Why does he feel so relieved?

“I want a nickname, though,” she adds on, mouth quirking upward. “Something special.”

*You’re already special enough*, he thinks. He hopes she can’t hear.

“I’ll have to think of something.”

El wraps her arm around his stomach, and that's when Mike decides that he wants her. He wants to be closer; closer than close. He wants to spend every minute of every day just like this.

He glances around for their friends and sees that they're all pretty much occupied; Dustin and Will are with Nancy and Jonathan (Mike still hasn't wrapped his head around *that*) and Lucas and Max are dancing again.

So Mike takes his chance and leans down.

He doesn't really know what he's doing. At least, he's pretty sure he doesn't; but then he's nudging her nose with his own, and she tilts her head upward, and then they're kissing.

He doesn't know where it comes from. It's just easy with her.

It's *amazing* with her.

His hand on her cheek, hers balling up his sweater in a fist. Mike is totally overwhelmed in a matter of seconds, but the second he breaks away she chases his lips with her own.

*Shit.*

If this isn't what heaven is like, Mike is pretty sure he never wants to go. He'd rather stay right here, forever.

The second kiss is a little longer than any of their others. It's mind-blowing. The tips of his fingers tingle with heat and electricity. His cheeks are warm. She tastes like cherry lipgloss and fruit punch.

El pulls back. "Good?"

"Yeah," he breathes. Then, "you wanna go somewhere? Talk?"

"Okay," she says.

---

The hallways are virtually empty, aside from them. Their shoes echo on the tile. Mike leads her through the maze he knows by heart and stops in front of a door.

“A/V room,” El reads.

“Yeah,” Mike nods. It’s someplace quiet, somewhere they won’t be disturbed. “I don’t have the keys, but I figured...”

El hums. She twitches her head to the left. Something clicks in the lock.

“You’re *so* cool,” he says.

Her cheeks flush. She doesn’t even have a nosebleed. She’s getting stronger and it’s awesome.

Mike opens the door to the small room, holding it for her as she slips past, and then they’re alone.

And she’s kissing him.

*Holy shit.*

Her lips are like, moving against his. It’s awesome. It feels so good. He has no idea how he’s still standing, and *how did he get up against the door?*

It’s even better after he gets over his initial paralysis because he kisses her back.

Sure, it’s probably like, beginner level stuff. But it also lasts like a whole *thirty seconds*.

Mike rips away from her, out of breath. “Y’know, when I said talk I actually meant it,” he tells her. “It’s awesome you know about euphemisms, though.”

El raises her eyebrows. “Euphemism?”

“It’s like, when you say something but you mean something else.”

She chews her bottom lip. “I just wanted to kiss you.”

“Oh.” Mike swallows. “That’s cool.”

“Are you okay?”

Her eyebrows are furrowed together, head tilted while she studies him. It's kind of cute and also a little unnerving.

He doesn't really know how to express how completely mind blowing it is that she's here at all, much less that they were just *kissing* two seconds ago. He doesn't know what to say. So he does the nerdiest thing he can think of; turns to technology.

"Can I show you something?"

El shrugs, so he takes that as clearance and leads her over to the desk. Mike sits down and pulls a chair up for her. "This," he says, booting up the system, "is a Macintosh. Mac for short."

El stares. "What... is it?"

"It's a computer," Mike says. The room is filled with the preternatural glow of the screen. "Which is basically something that processes data in binary form—like ones and zeroes, sort of how you have on your arm? From binary to decimals, that means three. Binary is like, the only language computers understand, because their transistors have two states, and the ones and zeros represent both, so the computer can solve problems, and, well, compute."

She's grinning at him and Mike doesn't know why, but he goes on.

"Mac computers are the best ones out there," he says. "They have a graphical user interface—which is like, way better than most computers, because they have text-based interfaces; so you have to type commands to get them to do anything. With these, you can just click. You can see everything. It's like, the coolest."

El quirks a brow. She's still smiling. Her face is inches from his own. "Tubular."

"It is, though," Mike turns back to the screen, as hard as that is. "It runs on the Motorola 68,000 microprocessor—which has a sixteen by thirty-two bit CISC—thirty-two on the data bus, instruction set, and registers, and sixteen on the ALU, which is like, the mathematical logic unit. Or arithmetic, technically, but that's still math. It's so fast, and it can do so much. Look, see—it has a calculator. And you can

write, and if you run out of RAM you can use the trash bin—”

“Mike,” El giggles, like actually *giggles*, and who cares about microprocessors when *that* sound exists. “I don’t know what any of that means.”

How do you think, again?

“Right,” he blushes. “Sorry.”

“Don’t,” she frowns, suddenly looking all apologetic. “I bet most people get it.”

“Actually, there’s a reason I’m a nerd,” he glares at the computer resentfully, and then actually feels bad for doing that. “It’s because I’m into this shit, and not a lot of people even care about computers—even though they’re literally the future. And because I’m like, lame and stringy and stuff.”

El’s brows furrow, but she seems to catch onto something that amuses her. “Stringy?”

Mike winces. “Yeah,” he says. “Like a string bean?”

“*What?*”

“Y’know, like, green beans,” Mike gets an idea. He grabs a pen and a sheet of paper and draws an awful rendition of a string bean. “Like that?”

El snorts with laughter. “Oh.”

He can’t help it when he beams at the sound. “So you’re not gonna tell me I look nothing like this? It’s all in your head, Mike. They’re just stupid bullies, Mike.”

Before he knows it, she’s wrapping her arms around his neck. “They are stupid,” she says, still grinning, “but you *do* look like a string bean.”

Mike suddenly doesn’t mind, that much. Especially when she’s looking at him like that; pupils blown and dimples showing, so alive

and real and perfect.

“Still pretty, though,” she amends, fingers reaching out to touch the nape of his neck, touch just gracing his hair.

“Yeah?”

He doesn’t even know what his name is; the only relevant thing is this warmth in the pit of his stomach and her smile and how *close* she is—

“Um, excuse me?”

They jump apart. Mike’s cheeks flame, and that embarrassment is only amplified when he sees Mr. Clarke standing in the doorway (looking equally mortified).

“Mr. Clarke,” Mike quickly switches off the computer and stands. “Uh...”

“It’s fine, Michael,” he looks between them, amusement starting to grace his features. “I take it this is your girlfriend? I don’t believe we’ve met; I’m Scott Clarke.”

He holds out his hand. El shakes it.

The whole situation is super discerning. Mike swallows. “This is Jane,” he blurts.

She can’t be El. El is one step away from Eleanor, and even if it’s been a year, all it takes is one slip up and he might actually start to recognise her.

El doesn’t even react. She just smiles.

“So are you new?”

“Home-schooled,” she supplies. “My dad teaches me.”

A cover story, Mike realises. It’s one she and Hopper must have made up before she came here.

Mr. Clarke nods. "So then how'd you two meet?"

"Library," Mike blurts.

"A fan of literature!" Mr. Clarke seems pleased. "Well, I was always more of a scientific mind, myself, as you may know—but the temptations of a good book never cease to break down my will."

El blinks.

Mike blinks. "Okay, so," he brushes off his tousers (why? what are you even doing?) and smiles apologetically. "We have to get going. E—Jane's gotta be home by ten."

Mr. Clarke nods. "Of course," he says. "Hey, did you get in here with a key by any chance?"

"No," Mike is already ushering El out the door. "It was unlocked."

"Drat," Mr. Clarke shakes his head. "I could've sworn I locked it."

"Sorry, Mr. Clarke."

"Nah, don't worry about it, Michael," he smiles. "Have a good night."

Mike grins. This is one of many reasons why Mr. Clarke is his favourite; he never pushes, never pries. "You too."

---

They hurry down back toward the gym. The rigidity of Mike's spine lessens as they put more distance between them and the A/V room.

Nancy bursts through the gymnasium doors just as they reach them. "Jesus!" She hisses. "Where have you been?! I was about to go all Jack Torrance on your ass."

Mike rolls his eyes. "I can take care of myself, you know."

"More like El can take care of you," she argues. "Seriously, where did you go?" She looks between them and starts to smirk. "Were you...?"

"Nancy, shut *up*," Mike tries to move past her, but she grabs onto

him.

“You think you’re so cool,” she teases, “sneaking off to make out with your girlfriend, huh?”

“Girlfriend?” El pipes up.

“We’ll talk about that later,” Mike replies quickly.

Nancy grins. “We gotta go,” is what she says, though. “Holly’s got the flu and mom needs help taking care of her.”

“Where’s dad?”

She gives him a look.

“Yeah, okay, stupid question.”

“I think everyone’s leaving,” Nancy assures him. “It’s late, anyway.”

A stupid part of him doesn’t want it to be over, because he has no idea when the hell he’s gonna see her again; he’d already waited weeks for this night. He can’t stomach the thought of going without her that long again.

Jonathan emerges from the doors with Will, Lucas, Max, and Dustin trailing behind him.

“Told ya!” Dustin shouts. “They were off sucking face!”

Lucas grumbles and hands over a crumpled five dollar bill.

“I hate you all,” Mike snaps.

“Liar,” Dustin flashes the money with a grin before stuffing it in his pocket.

“Alright, alright,” Nancy starts shepherding them all out of the building, “I’ve got Mike and Lucas, right?”

“Affirmative,” Dustin reports. “And I’m with Steve.”

“Steve?!” Nancy stops short just as they break through the double

doors, cool night air hitting them like a slap in the face. “Since when?!”

“Since, like, *duh*,” Dustin says.

Nancy glances at Jonathan, and like a dog retreating to her haunches she backs off. “You could’ve said,” she mumbles.

“Listen, it’s not my fault I’m the supreme greatest wingman of all time, and therefore service Hawkins’ biggest player—”

“*Dude*,” Mike whacks him upside the head.

“You got it wrong,” Lucas’s hands come down on Mike’s shoulders. “*He’s* the biggest player.”

“Screw you,” Mike tries to whack him, too, but Lucas ducks out of reach.

“Leave him alone,” Will says to them all, smiling even with that eerie finality that they can’t help but abide by.

They reach the cars where Hopper and Joyce are waiting, sharing a cigarette. They’re leaning against the Blazer, smoke curling skyward. The embers of the Camel glow in the night, shadowing Hopper’s face as he sucks in a drag.

“Have a good time, kid?”

El shrugs, a constant presence at Mike’s side. He doesn’t even have to look to know she’s there; he can just sort of feel her, steady and warm. “Pretty good.”

“More than good,” Dustin grins. “There’s a running bet they rounded second b—”

Mike shoves him before he can finish. “Are you *trying* to get me killed?!”

“Lay off of my little brother,” Nancy warns, absentmindedly fishing through her purse for the keys.

“Yeah, lay off,” Mike agrees.

“Oh, I’m not helping you out,” Nancy says, “I’m just making sure your energy is saved so you can change Holly’s poopy pull-ups when we get home.”

“Rather change hers than yours,” he snaps.

She gapes. “You *dick!*”

Mike moves away from her attempted shove, laughing.

“Okay!” Hopper cuts over them all, rubbing his temples (but Mike is like, eighty percent certain he’s hiding a smile), “that’s enough. El, come on, we gotta get back.”

Mike’s blood runs cold. His smile drops. He wants more than anything to pull her aside and say goodbye in private—it’s something he should’ve done before—but she’s already standing on her toes to kiss his cheek.

“See you, Stringy,” she says.

He doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “See you, El.”

Their idiot friends are making kissing sounds behind them and it’s all so *stupid*, but her eyes look really dark in this light, and he knows then that he has her. Always.

“Shut up, assholes,” Max growls. “God, you’re obnoxious.”

El goes over to Hopper, who ruffles her hair despite her protests and drops the cigarette butt into the blacktop.

After called goodbyes and some weird glance between Joyce and Hopper that holds something, they’re gone.

(it’s like someone snaps a cord in mike, watching them drive away.)

“Okay,” Joyce is already retrieving her lighter. “Ready, kiddos?”

“Uh,” Jonathan hesitates, “I was gonna...”

“Wait for Steve?” Nancy throws out.

“That,” Jonathan nods. “You guys can go without me, I’ll get a ride.”

Joyce raises her eyebrows. “You sure?”

“Yeah,” Jonathan nods. He ruffles Will’s hair and ushers him forward. “I’ll be home soon.”

“Alright, well... Have fun,” Joyce says, probably half meaning it under all that worry.

Will waves at them all. “Bye, guys.”

“Bye,” they chorus, slightly miserable already.

Then they’re gone, too, and the rest of the Party is left in the parking lot standing on wet asphalt, shivering in the cold.

Mike zeroes on Max, though, and knows what he has to do. It really can’t wait, given they have break after this. “Can I talk to you for a sec?”

“Ooo, an audience with the Paladin,” Dustin teases. “Just remember to keep your panties on—”

He breaks off with a hiss as Lucas clocks him in the shoulder. Mike flips him the bird, in unison with Max.

Mike leads her out of earshot of the others. She follows hesitantly, looking uncertain in her own right.

“Okay,” Mike stops, “so I know I’ve been a total prick—”

“Yeah, you could say that again,” she shoots, folding her arms over her chest.

“You know, I’m trying to apologise.”

“Yeah? I don’t hear an apology.”

“You don’t make it easy, Mayfield.”

Max rolls her eyes. She's silent for a moment, and then gestures with her hand for him to get on with it.

"Right! So, I'm sorry. Super sorry."

"That's it?!"

She looks incredulous, and it's totally uncalled for. "What's wrong with that? It came from the heart! I *meant* it!"

"You've been a total asswad to me since I got here, Wheeler, and I have no idea why. All I wanted was some friends and you had to make that *so difficult*, huh?" She pokes his chest with each word. "And now, you finally have the decency to admit you were a shithead and all you have to say is 'I'm sorry'?!"

Her voice is raised. He's pretty sure they can hear her, so he shushes her.

Bad idea.

"Don't *even*!" She whacks his arm. "You're the worst, you know that? And it only makes it that much harder to hate you because you're so *nice* to everyone else! Like, it's not a mystery why they all look at you like you invented *bread*, so what is it about me that gets your god-damned panties in a twist?!"

"Forget it," he rolls his eyes.

"Uh, no," she grabs his arm and yanks him back. "Spit it out, Wheeler."

He takes a deep breath, and then explains.

"We're like, really exclusive, okay? I mean, no one *wants* to be friends with us, but it was always just... the Party. Ever since Dustin came here in the fourth grade. And then El showed up, and Will went missing, and it just felt... balanced, I guess. Like even if we'd lost someone, we'd gained someone we needed. It felt right. And then she... *y'know*, and Will came back, and we all had to pretend all this messed up shit never happened, and it sucked. It hurt so much, every day, and the guys were just acting like it was fine.

“And then you rolled in, and for some reason they wanted you to join, and this stupid idiot part of me felt like they were trying to replace El and just move on, and I’d *had it* with everyone just acting like she’d never existed because I mean, when people do that shit long enough you start to think, you know? What if it really *was* in my head? What if none of it ever actually happened?”

Mike sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I just wanted her back. And you weren’t her, but they thought you were just as cool. I guess I was sort of jealous *for* her, and.. it was stupid, okay? All of it. I just wasn’t thinking clearly, but I am now, I promise.”

Max stares at him for a long minute. Then she shakes her head. “She’s got you wrapped around her finger, you know that?”

He shrugs.

Max purses her lips. “Alright, I guess I deem your apology acceptable,” she mutters.

“What was that? Couldn’t hear you.”

“I said, *apology accepted*, dickhead!”

Mike recoils away as she yells in his ear. “Ugh, you asshole,” he growls.

“Yeah, get used to it.”

They glare at one another for a second, before her she smirks. “So we’re cool?”

“Yeah,” Mike nods. “We’re cool.”

She rubs her upper arms, shivering and bouncing on the balls of her feet. Mike frowns. “Is Billy picking you up?”

“Supposed to,” she replies darkly.

He hesitates, uncertain, before, “Need a ride?”

Max’s eyes light up. “Really?”

“Yeah, why not,” Mike starts leading her back to the others. “Nance might even let you drive.”

She shoves him. “Shut up.”

“Okay, but seriously, you’re not half bad,” he admits. “Like, you pulled a solid three point turn. I mean, we almost died when you backed out, but still.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Mike nods. “Zoomer. Oh, and speaking of, I have your D&D character sheet all made up. I was gonna give it to you for Christmas, but I just, like, wanted to make sure you weren’t gonna get all offended. It’s definitely the most nerdy game of all time, and I’m not sure you can handle it.”

“Can’t handle it?!” She shoves his shoulder. “Please. I bet I could kick your sorry ass at that game in my sleep.”

“It’s D&D,” he laughs. “You don’t kick *anyone’s* ass but the monsters I make up.”

“And *I* can’t make up monsters?”

“Not if you’re not DM,” he says. “And I’m *always* DM.”

Max waves a dismissive hand. “I’ll find a way,” she says. “And thanks.”

“No problem.”

They get back just as Steve’s BMW pulls into the lot. He’s blasting some pop hit and actually singing along to the beat. It’s enough to give Mike nightmares for a week.

“Hey, kid,” Steve flicks the locks and grins at Dustin, “how many chicks?”

“Zero,” Dustin reports morosely.

Nancy nudges him. “One,” she corrects.

Dustin blushes (*gross*). “I didn’t know if you counted,” he admits.

Nance shrugs. She leans forward and kisses his cheek, and Mike has to amend: *that* is enough to give him nightmares for a month.

Still, he can appreciate what she did. It was sort of cool.

She’s *sometimes* okay.

“Better luck next time, little man,” he says. “Hop in.”

Dustin waves at them all, looking like someone just handed him some rare dinosaur fossil before sliding into Steve’s BMW.

Nancy steps up. She whispers something to Steve, and Mike can’t mask his confusion as he looks between the equally befuddled Steve Harrington and the utterly tranquil Jonathan Byers.

“Dustin, get in the back.”

*What?*

“Uh, excuse me?”

“Just this once, man,” Steve gestures, “Byers needs a ride.”

“Jonathan doesn’t—Jonathan, can’t you ride with Nance?”

Mike thinks something along the lines of, *And I’m the oblivious one?*

“Dustin,” Nancy pleads, “please? For me?”

It works. Dustin sighs regretfully and switches to the back seat. Lucas calls something about him looking like a giant baby, to which Dustin eloquently flips him the finger.

Jonathan kisses Nancy’s cheek (double gross) and ducks into the car. He and Steve glance at each other.

Then they pull out.

Mike frowns at his sister. “You’re up to something.”

"Am not," she replies airily. "Jonathan needed a ride and Mom won't want us using so much gas, so I just... stop looking at me like that!"

"Like what?!"

"You're giving me the look," she snaps. "The '*I-Know-What-You're-Hiding*' one. And you *don't*. And I'm not. So stop."

Mike nods. "Uh-huh."

She kicks him. "Just get in the damn car, all of you."

---

Mike fiddles with the radio as they drive, going from station to station. Everything sucks.

Nancy slaps his hand away. "You're gonna break it."

"Oh my god," he says. "Are you serious?"

"This car is like, as old as you."

"It's like six months old."

"Exactly."

Mike rolls his eyes. He spends the rest of the drive in relative silence. They stop at Max's first, of course. She kisses Lucas's cheek (leaving them both blushing) and punches Mike in the shoulder.

"See you next week," she says.

"Bye, MadMax," Lucas says.

"*Bye MadMax*," Mike mimics, exaggerating a falsetto.

Lucas lunges for him. Mike squirms away, grinning.

Max rolls her eyes. "I'm out," she says. Then she is.

"Both of you stop trying to kill each other," Nancy orders. "I'm trying to drive."

They settle back into their seats.

“He started it,” Lucas grumbles.

“Uh, no,” Mike snaps. “You did when you acted like a total shithead earlier.”

“It’s not my fault you and your girlfriend are obnoxious!”

“Oh, *shut up!*”

“Boys!” Nancy yells. “I’m driving!”

“You’re listing,” Mike corrects.

“*Fuck off!*”

They get to Maple not long after that. Nancy jerks the car to a stop in front of the Sinclair’s. She turns to them both. “You know, one day, you’re both gonna realise that having girlfriends and kissing and all that shit isn’t a big deal,” she says.

Mike nods. “That explains a lot of your behaviour.”

“Excuse me?”

“What? Nothing. I didn’t say anything.”

Lucas grins at them. “Thanks for the ride, Nance.” He does the unexpected and kisses her cheek.

Mike gags.

“Oh, did you want one, too?”

“Screw you,” Mike says. Then, “call me later.”

Lucas laughs. “Yeah, okay.”

He ducks out. Nancy drives in a U to their own house, pulling up. She stops the car and turns to him.

“Did you have a good time?”

Mike shrugs. "Yeah," he says. "You?"

"Yeah." She smiles. "I'm glad you have El."

"Oh, god," Mike makes a desperate show of clawing at the handle. "Don't get sentimental."

"No, I'm serious." She grabs his hand, prompting him to face her.

Mike meets her eyes and all he sees is earnestness. It's been so long since she's looked at him like that; open and un-guarded and a little childish. He thinks the last time, she was wearing fake fairy wings and holding some cheap dollar-store wand, hanging off the end of the basement couch. Is it weird he can remember that?

"I'm glad you have Jonathan," he tells her, meaning it. "And Steve."

Her eyes widen. "Mike!"

"What?! I'm being genuine, I swear." He shrugs. "It's cool."

"It is?"

"Yeah," he doesn't know why. She's happy, though, so that's sort of all that matters. "I won't tell, don't worry."

Nancy nods. She bites her lip. "Hey, um... last year, you didn't go to the Snowball, and..."

Mike quirks a brow. "Yeah?"

"I—" she frowns. "I heard you, downstairs. You were talking to her, and I didn't say anything. I should have, though. I just didn't know what to do."

Mike's veins turn to ice. "You heard?"

He remembers how small he'd felt, then. How distraught. He'd been crying—hot tears prickling at the corners of his eyes and spilling over even if he hadn't wanted them to. He'd wiped them away furiously and thrown the supercom down, but he hadn't left the fort, because he'd felt something (a thing he now knows is her, hovering,

listening). He hadn't been able to manage that.

"You were so sad," Nancy says now. "The whole year, and I didn't... I didn't help you. I'm sorry for that."

"You don't have to be."

"Mike—"

He squeezes her hand. "Really, Nance. It's good, now, okay?"

She nods, eyes glistening.

*Might as well.*

Mike leans forward and kisses her cheek. "It's okay," he promises.

Nancy laughs, and even if it sounds more like a sob, he's not too worried. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I promise."

---

That night, after stripping off his uncomfortable clothing and brushing his teeth, after washing the night off of himself, Mike slips under his cool covers and closes his eyes. It's not sleep that claims him—it's something else. Something better.

A gentle tug, like the way he sometimes pulls at one of Holly's braids. It feels like the sun is shining pleasantly down on his back. But it's not the sun, it's just her impression.

(what's the difference?)

*Hi, Mike.*

Her voice is far-away but no less present, vibrating against his skull. Mike grins against his pillow.

*Hey, El.*

---

three

---

Loud.

The sound is deafening; it drowns out everything else—drowns out the screaming that so clearly breaks from her mouth, tears streaking her cheeks, standing out starkly against her skin with a silver-clear hue.

Another beat.

It's so loud it shatters something (or maybe she does that all on her own). Glass.

A transparent partition that separates her from him. She's sitting at a table, but then she isn't; she's shooting out of a metal chair and circling it, head lowered, eyes so dark they're black.

The electrode-ridden net on her head falls to the floor.

Another beat. It's a *heartbeat*; contraction and expansion, too fast. It's hers.

"No."

The glass shatters. It zooms toward him, and he can almost feel the sharp piercing as it makes contact with his chest, but then—

---

Mike jerks awake. His first thought is a registration of how sick he feels, like he really might vomit. The second is that he's soaked with sweat; fully, through his shirt and sheets.

The third is that she isn't okay.

He can hear her screaming in his head. It's so loud he's surprised the world hasn't torn in two yet.

It spurs him into action. Mike rises, despite the splitting headache he

feels—not to mention the overwhelming nausea. None of it matters when she's like this. He doesn't give a shit about himself if *she's not okay*.

Quickly, he peels off his sodden shirt and grabs a fresh one. He shakes out his hair, downs the glass of water on his bedside table, and then grabs his shoes and jacket.

Steadily, he goes about tying his shoes. The whole process is hushed and full of fumbling. He can't think at all. He knows that under normal circumstances he would be hesitant, but he's being called, now.

As he jerks open his door, the screaming stops.

He hears a sob. It's slow and far away, like a late transmission, but clear all the same.

*Mike...*

He doesn't need to hear anything else. Mike hurries down the stairs, mindful of his dad asleep in the Lay-Z-Boy, creeps over to the front door, and slips outside.

It's raining.

Like, bad. The skies have opened up and unleashed a heavy, unmerciful gale. Lightning cracks across the sky, followed by the rumble of thunder and her quiet whimper in the back of his mind.

He skirts around the house and grabs his bike from where it leans against the side of the garage. The metal handlebar is freezing, but his fingers are already pretty numb.

*I'm coming.*

---

The Blazer isn't out front.

Mike puts the pieces together as he bikes down the muddy, mulched path to the cabin. He shivers on his seat, teeth chattering. Mike drops the bike and runs up the porch steps, knocking the way he'd been

told to last week.

He's never been here before. He only knows the way because he'd been planning on coming tomorrow—they were gonna make a day of it, all of them. Play D&D and watch movies, be normal. The last day before the second semester of school starts.

Screw that, though.

Screw that because it takes her less than a minute to jerk open then door, so he knows she's been waiting. Screw that because she looks like someone ripped her heart out and crushed it right in front of her; eyes red-rimmed and full of tears, the tip of her nose pink. She's clutching a blanket to her chest like she hadn't had the heart to drop it when she got out of bed.

"I killed you," she sobs.

"No," Mike ducks in, slamming the door behind him—blocking out the storm, some, though the rain still patters against the roof and windows.

The boarded up, curtained windows.

He pulls her to him. "You *didn't*," he promises. "It was just a dream, okay?"

El keeps crying. Her arms are weak around his neck, but they're there. He holds her close, soaking up her warmth. *I'm here. You're okay.*

Her curls tickle his chin, but Mike really doesn't mind.

El hiccups a sob and pulls back. "You're all wet," she says, voice raspy.

"I know," he says. He also feels like he might pass out, or turn into a human ice cube. Whichever comes first.

El shakes her head in a sort of 'that won't do' manner and reaches up to push the jacket from his shoulders. It falls to the floor with a thump. He kicks it away with his sneakers, which squeak from the

water within them.

“You need dry clothes,” El decides, surveying him. “Hop has stuff.”

“El—”

“You first,” she says firmly.

El points to the other side of the cabin, to a door. It’s cracked, slightly. In the darkness, Mike can just make out a bed and a nightstand.

He stumbles over, teeth still shattering, hair plastered to his forehead. His clothes feel like a second skin on his body.

Mike rummages through Hopper’s dresser. It feels wrong, so all he takes is a fresh white undershirt and a plaid to go over that. And some socks. Warm socks sound so good, right now.

El steers him through the small cabin to the bathroom. “Privacy,” she says.

Mike tries really hard to smile. As it is, he feels it on the inside. Maybe she knows that. Hopefully.

He changes pretty quickly, despite how sluggish everything seems. It’s a vast improvement, but it just makes the wetness of his jeans seem more pronounced.

Mike grabs a dry towel and rings out his hair. It does that annoying curling thing that’s been happening lately; sticking up everywhere and looping in some haphazard way.

Big improvement. The goosebumps go away and his nerves calm drastically.

Mike drinks some more water from the sink, relishing in the way his stomach stops flipping.

El knocks on the door. “Done?”

“Yeah,” he opens it. “Hi.”

She looks like a druid, or something. Short and sylphlike, brown eyes earnest as they shine up at him, cheeks tinged with pink. Something in his stomach melts.

“Hi,” she says.

“Are you okay?”

“Sorta,” she rakes her teeth over her lower lip, causing his eyes to drift there. The moment feels suddenly languid. “You?”

Mike is too tired to lift his gaze. “Yeah,” he nods. “Sorta.”

“Wanna kiss me?”

“Uh-huh.”

El smiles. It’s not full of joy or whatever, but it’s half-peaceful and a little anticipatory, so he takes it. They kiss sort of lazily, breaking apart and then coming back together.

“C’mon,” she grabs his hand and tugs, pulling him in the direction of another door.

Her bedroom.

“Um...”

“Sit with me. Talk.” She pauses. “Not a euphemism.”

Mike accepts that. He lets her yank him toward the bed, which is topped with a flowery pink and yellow quilt. It’s soft and homely in here, with the golden light and her one-eyed teddy bear.

“What’s his name?” Mike asks.

“Mike,” she replies promptly.

His cheeks flame. “Oh.”

El slides under her covers. Mike sits hesitantly on the end of her mattress, running his fingers over the fabric of her bedspread. She rests her elbows on her knees and observes him in that otherworldly

way she always manages.

“Where’s Hopper?” He asks, after a minute of silence.

“Working late,” El replies. “Won’t be back ’til three.”

“And he just *left* you here?”

“Door’s locked,” she defends. “No one knows. We have a radio, and I have...” she jerks her chin, though nothing moves.

“Superpowers,” Mike supplies.

“Gifts,” she corrects.

There’s a finality in her tone that he doesn’t want to argue with at all. They are gifts, anyway.

(abilities. the reasons she’s in this cabin, in the middle of the woods, and not a normal house in a normal bedroom)

“What did they do to you?”

He doesn’t mean to just, like, ask, and he winces when the words come tumbling out of his mouth. *Shit*. “Sorry,” he says quickly, before she speaks. “It’s just... I’m just curious.”

It’s been on his mind since he met her, and the thought only gets more recurrent as time passes. Now, with this dream—seeing her small, with a shaved head again, in some white room that’s too horrible for a mind to just *make up*—he can’t help but ask.

El tugs on a loose thread in the quilt stitching, contemplating him, almost. Her eyes are searching. “I want to tell you.”

“You don’t have to,” Mike assures her swiftly. “It’s okay, really.”

“No,” El shakes her head, “it’s not. I want to.”

“O-Okay,” Mike scoots higher up on the bed. *Screw it*. He shuffles until he’s next to her. “This is fine?”

“Yeah,” she reaches out and takes his hand, slowly intertwining their

fingers. Just that slight touch makes him lightheaded.

“Cool.”

“Cool,” she returns, smiling softly. It’s fleeting, though, contorting into a pained grimace that really makes him regret opening his mouth. “I don’t...”

“Don’t know where to start?”

El bobs her head.

“Well how about the day you met me? The day you escaped?”

She seems to latch onto that. “Day I met you,” she mutters. “The bath.”

“Yeah,” his spine tingles at the words. He remembers the way she’d sounded, so *scared*, as she’d floated on her back in that stupid kiddie pool all those months ago. He remembers hearing Will’s quiet, weakened voice through the speaker of the supercom. “Tell me about that.”

El sucks in a shaky breath, and begins.

“It was... cold. Always cold there. And at night, there was no sound. Just quiet. I didn’t know anything else. I didn’t sleep, because of the bad dreams. Of the void.”

Mike squeezes her hand, all too aware of the way her eyes have gone unseeing. But she squeezes back.

“Papa game into my room that morning and gave me violets. Told me, ‘*today, we make contact,*’ and then he... took me to the bath. There were more people there than before. They put me inside and everything was dark. I couldn’t hear or see, and then—” she sucks in a sharp breath. “*It was there. And I touched it. I screamed, and the walls cracked. It got out.*”

*The gate. I opened it. I’m the monster.*

A tear falls onto the blanket. Mike reaches out and tucks a hand

under her chin, wiping her cheeks the way his mom always did when he was small.

“When I was bad,” she goes on, eyes on his and swimming with emotion, “he would lock me away. In the room. It was small, and there was no bed, and no light, and I’d have to sit in there all day.”

“El—”

“I killed people, Mike,” she sobs. “I killed them when they tried to put me in there, again. I didn’t *wanna*. But Papa... Papa said I was good.”

At this, she sobers up slightly and seethes. “*Fascinating*,” she spits, voice thick. “*Extraordinary*. Not me. My gifts.”

His eyes sting. “El...”

But she holds up her hand. “You... you let me chose. You listened to me. You—you’re the best person I’ve ever met.”

Tears spill over. Mike can’t do anything but pull her closer, rest his forehead against her own, and his absolute hardest not to cry harder than this.

Mike holds her; a volatile, totally mind-blowing girl who really is *just a girl* (she can do heroic and awesome shit, sure, but *still*). She’s small, now. Like, tiny; easily collapsing against him, letting herself be folded into his embrace as she shakes and sobs against his chest. It doesn’t take long for his shirt to soak through, but this time, Mike doesn’t mind.

At all.

And that’s when he realises he loves her.

He knows he shouldn’t. At least, not yet. They’re too young and everything is so complicated.

But he does anyway. He loves her. So, so much. It’s all-consuming, untempered, and totally unconditional. Like a wave of warm water, the feeling washes over him. It settles in his stomach, somehow

expected. It goes unspoken for two more years, but it's still there all the while. Growing; with each laugh, each smile, each touch.

His love for her, it never stops. One day, he's certain it'll cover the expanse of the entire universe. Maybe it already does, and it's just channeled through him. Maybe they're bound together, no matter what, no matter where or when.

He likes that thought. It's a small comfort, just then, with his cheek pressed against her curls and her fingers digging into his skin through his shirt.

Mike kisses her.

He doesn't know exactly why. Half of him wants to seal that internal promise of forever. The other half just wants to touch her in some deeper way, to feel her lips against his. They're salty and warm; just the slightest bit chapped. He feels himself sink into it in a way he never really has before, lingering longer, grazing her mouth with his before drawing back entirely.

He's forgotten all about the rain. He's forgotten everything except her. How she does that to him, he doesn't know.

El reaches up. She traces his jawline and cheekbones, his nose, his lips. The feeling endures, his skin buzzing against her hovering fingers.

Mike grabs her hand and kisses her knuckles. Her cheeks turn pink, almost like blossoming roses.

"Thank you for telling me."

Somewhere deep down he knows it's not even half of it. He knows there's more than dark rooms and silence and manipulation. He knows, but he's not gonna push it tonight.

El sniffs. "Thank you for being you."

Mike doesn't trust himself to speak. He holds her hand to his mouth and just sort of looks, instead.

She doesn't seem to mind. El rests her head against the wall. A lock of brown hair falls into her eyes, which she attempts to blow away.

It's one hundred percent the cutest thing he's ever seen, *ever*.

"Are you hungry?"

El nods.

It spurs him into action. He jumps off the bed and stumbles into the kitchen, which is easy to find given it's just around the corner.

The fridge is old—like, 1950s old. Mike takes stock and comes up with...

Not much.

"Eggos."

He swivels around. "Freezer?"

El nods. She hops up on the counter and watches as he removes six from the box. Four for him, given he's been eating a shit-ton more lately, and two for her.

They don't take long to make. Mike tops them with whipped cream and slides her plate over.

"You don't wanna sit at the table?"

El shakes her head. "I'm as tall as you when I'm up here."

He grins, and that's when it comes to him: almost like it's just dropped into his head from outer space.

"Okay, then, Shortstack."

El pauses mid bite. "Shortstack?"

Mike smiles ominously. He jerks his chin at her eggos, propping up next to her. "Yup."

"What does that mean?"

“Don’t worry about it.”

“*Mike.*”

“Yes, Shortstack?”

It only infuriates her more, but it’s super fucking cute, the way her nose wrinkles up and she scowls. Then it just melts away in a second, into something so *good*. She smiles in a way that’s bordering on effervescent. “Oh.”

Mike smirks. “Thought so.”

---

He doesn’t know how they end up in front of the TV, but they do.

El puts on a *Family Ties* rerun. The sound is slightly muffled given the crap quality of the television, but it takes away from the constantly crashing gale.

They sit in the darkness. She’s luminous; the light from the screen beacons her face, darkened every so often as it flickers. She’s ghostly, or maybe angelic.

Mike pulls her close to him, mindless of anything but the urge to.

She falls asleep first. He can actually *feel* when her breaths steady, her body curled against his side, head on his chest and legs all mixed up with his.

He waits.

“You asleep?”

No response. Her eyelashes are dark. They don’t move, though, and so Mike takes that as confirmation.

He touches her hand. “I love you, El.”

Still, nothing. His heart is pounding, *he can’t breathe*, but she didn’t even hear.

*Thank god.*

---

He wakes up to the sound of locks clicking.

Mike's first instinct is to shoot off the couch, but El's weight is surprisingly heavy enough to keep him pinned.

*Shit.*

More jostling, more clinking. Then the front door opens and closes softly.

"Jane?"

It's Hopper. Of *course* it's Hopper—Mike doesn't know why he doubted it. Maybe it's something about this place; it reminds him of their need to hide at all.

He pops his head up over the couch.

Hopper starts. "Jesus!"

"God, I'm not Freddie Krueger."

Hopper squints. "Who?"

"Nightmare on Elm Street?" Mike prompts. "The serial killer? Or maybe you only remember ones from your childhood. Like, H.H. Holmes?"

Hopper scowls. He flips Mike off.

(But there's a split second where his lip twitches, and Mike knows there's hope.)

"What are you doing here?"

"El needed me."

"No shit," Hopper steps closer, leaning over to observe El, who's still curled up against Mike. "She needed *someone*. Why not call me?"

“You were busy,” Mike says. “She had a bad dream.”

Hopper studies them both for a minute, almost long enough for Mike to start squirming. He’s still so pissed, but also, Hopper is damn intimidating when he wants to be.

“So you biked here,” Hopper says, “in this weather, to help the kid?”

“Yeah,” Mike resists the temptation to tack on a well-earned ‘duh’.

“Christ,” Hopper turns away, rubbing his temples.

“What? You wanted me to leave her here alone?”

“Don’t you guys have those radios?”

“Mine broke,” Mike snaps. Why is he suddenly so *irritated*?

*(because she was mine first. I helped her first. I get to be around her. I don’t need to be dictated by you.)*

Hopper glares. “Okay,” he sighs. “Get up, I’m taking you home.”

“What? It’s like, four in the morning.”

“Exactly my point,” Hopper says. “If your mom finds your bed empty bright and early, what’s she gonna think?”

He rolls his eyes. “That happens all the time.”

“What?”

“Don’t—” Mike fumes. “That’s not the point.”

“What is the point then, Wheeler?”

“She needs me,” he says, tone harsher than intended. Well, not actually. It’s probably a marginally lighter reflection of his inner anger.

“Well, *I’m* here now.”

“Well, so what?”

*Oh, shit.*

There's a deafening quiet. Mike's ears are ringing, blood boiling.

Only Hopper doesn't yell like Mike is expecting. He just pales, sighs, and runs a hand down his face. "You have a mouth on you, kid."

Mike scowls. Why isn't he pissed? "Most people do."

Then Hopper *laughs*.

It's so unexpected Mike almost falls off the couch. He has to grab the cushion for balance. *What the hell?*

"Get up," he chuckles. "Seriously, lets go."

Mike is so stunned he doesn't protest. "Uh," He glances down at El.

She squirms, reaching for him even as he slides out from under her willowy form. "Stringy?"

"I gotta go," he whispers. "Are you okay?"

El nods tiredly. "Bye."

He doesn't care that Hopper is standing right there. Mike leans in and kisses her cheek. "Bye, Shortstack."

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"That my shirt?"

"Does this actually constitute as an article of clothing?"

A beat. The wipers rake across the windshield, creaking as they go.

"What year is this?"

It's the sort of question his dad would ask. He has absolutely no clue why it falls from his mouth.

Hopper raises his eyebrow, and Mike can practically sense the smartass comment of '1985' just *begging* to be uttered, but he holds back.

“1980,” he replies.

“Do you ever get maintenance for it?”

*What are you even saying.*

“Not really,” Hopper glances at Mike, sounding almost uncertain. “Why?”

“I was just observing what a piece of junk it is,” Mike replies casually.

*Oh, you’re so smooth, huh? Well you’ll be even smoother after he drives over you with his piece of shit car!*

Hopper shakes his head. He’s smirking.

Mike has no idea what’s happening, but he’s semi-aware he’s instigated most of this.

“So,” Hopper says after a small lapse, “Stringy, huh? That’s cute.”

His cheeks flame. “It’s also none of your business.”

“You made it my business when you snuck into my house,” Hopper returns.

“You mean the house with the boarded up windows? With her tiny bedroom? Sorry, I was under the impression it was more of a *shack*.”

Hopper winces. “Listen, kid—”

“No, you listen!” *Stop! Now!* “You don’t know what it was like for her in that place, okay? It *sucked*. And now you’re doing the same things; you’re locking her up, you don’t even let her sit on the porch. You just keep her inside, like she’s some animal. And I know, okay, I get it: you’re ‘*protecting*’ her. But she can take care of herself. She’s strong. She deserves a little sunlight, okay?”

Hopper doesn’t speak for a while.

When he does, they’re maybe three minutes from Mike’s house. His

voice is low. "You can come over three times during the week, after school. Your friends can come too, but on the weekends, I want company limited to two guests, got it?"

He doesn't wait for a reply. "Bring your sister along sometimes to help El with the harder stuff. What are you good at?"

His heart is racing. "Excuse me?"

"In *school*, kid."

"Everything," Mike replies immediately. And then, not to sound arrogant, "We all are. We're *nerds*."

"Okay," Hopper pulls into the cul-de-sac. "You guys'll help her catch up. I want her high school ready by late August."

"What?"

"Not September, not October, August. Clear?"

*Holy shit.*

"Crystal clear. Sir. Chief."

He smiles. "Hopper'll do. Now get out of my piece of shit, and make sure your mom doesn't hear you, huh?"

"Right," Mike's cheeks hurt from smiling. "Yeah. Of course. Thanks. Thank you."

Hopper nods. Mike awkwardly closes the heavy door, only to struggle with the back. He heaves his bike from the bed and backs away from the car.

Hopper pulls out with surprising speed. Mike watches him go for just a second, stupidly, and then runs up the sidewalk to his house.

The downpour slaps against his back as he circles the side to the basement. Mike retrieves the key from the ceramic turtle and fumbles with the lock.

The basement is dark. He shuts the door softly behind him and stumbles through the blackness with his arms outstretched.

“Shit!”

Mike rubs his hip, glaring resentfully at the spot where the table must be. Thankfully, he knows how to get to the couch from here.

Mike plops down with a sigh. He doesn't care that he's yet again wet, or that he's still wearing his shoes.

She's going to high school with them. He gets to see her, and not just in the middle of the night, in secret.

And he loves her.

Mike falls asleep with a smile on his face.

### **Author's Note:**

So, I have no idea where this came from. It just sort of happened. Like I said, I'm a slut for post-gate fics and then things sort of spiralled from there.

I swear, I JUST wanted to write Mike reacting to El's curly hair. I have no clue where the rest of this came from.

Writing Hopper and Mike actually adds five years onto my life!

I wanted to do something a bit softer and more youthful this time, so I hope I accomplished that. Mike geeking out over a Macintosh computer was also unplanned but once it had started I... couldn't stop it. What a nerd.

(also I apologise if any of that shit he said is inaccurate; I used Wikipedia and my internal flame of hope to try and make it work)

Thank you so much for reading!!! Bother me on

tumblr @mad-maxxy. Like seriously. I love it when you guys send asks, and if you're shy, anon is on!

<3